



# Al-Masāq

## Journal of the Medieval Mediterranean

ISSN: 0950-3110 (Print) 1473-348X (Online) Journal homepage: <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/calm20>

## A Companion to Medieval Palermo

Patrizia Sardina

To cite this article: Patrizia Sardina (2015) A Companion to Medieval Palermo, *Al-Masāq*, 27:2, 178-179, DOI: [10.1080/09503110.2015.1049428](https://doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2015.1049428)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2015.1049428>



Published online: 21 Aug 2015.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 14



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at  
<http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=calm20>

**A Companion to Medieval Palermo**

ANNLIESE NEF (Ed.), 2013

[Brill's Companions to European History, volume V]

Leiden-Boston: Brill

XVIII + 542 pp., ill., maps

€167.00/US\$216.00 (hardback)

ISBN 9789004223929

The aim of this book is to recast the medieval history of Palermo beyond the old and stereotypical idea of a city characterised by political immaturity and cultural richness due to a series of foreign dominations. Even though the history of Palermo is unevenly documented in the sources, the editor declares in the foreword an intention to attach equal significance to all the various historical periods, especially the Islamic one, which is usually less studied. Cultural, religious and archeological aspects are considered to be as relevant as the political, social and economic dimensions of the city's history. The book contains five sections, divided into a total of sixteen chapters. Section 1 concerns the Byzantine and Islamic city, section 2 is about Norman Palermo, section 3 deals with Palermo in the eighth/fourteenth and ninth/fifteenth centuries, and section 4 is dedicated to "Transversal Approaches". The last section, by Fabrizio Titone, despite the title ("Conclusive Perspectives"), does not contain a final conclusion, but only some considerations about the evolution of Sicilian cities in the Aragonese period. At the end of the book, there is a very useful and accurate index containing names, toponyms and other items.

According to Vivien Prigent, during the Byzantine domination Palermo "assumed a prominent economic role" (p. 37) in the north-western part of Sicily thanks to the integration of its rich agricultural hinterland and possession of a renowned port that was frequented by Eastern merchants, especially Jews, Syrians and Egyptians. Annliese Nef underlines not only the growing political role given to Palermo by the Aghlabids, who transformed the city into the seat of government, but also its economic and monetary integration into the Fatimid realm. She also mentions the religious and cultural position that the city attained in the Islamic world, making Palermo a very important city of *dār al-islām*. This idea is shared by Alessandra Bagnera, who uses archaeological evidence to outline the urban evolution of Islamic Palermo. Mirella Cassarino examines the complex characteristics of Arabic and Islamic culture in Palermo from the third/ninth to the sixth/twelfth century and points out the difficulty in distinguishing "Palermo as experienced from Palermo as imagined" (p. 128). In her essay on Norman monuments, Rosa Di Liberto emphasises the gradual creation of a local architectonic tradition and a Norman figurative language. Elena Pezzini makes a fundamental contribution to the topographic reconstruction of Norman Palermo and assumes that religious conflicts conditioned Palermo's *forma urbis* deeply and drove Christian elites to choose well-defended spaces and the Muslims to take refuge in a patrolled quarter.

In his two magisterial studies, Henri Bresc successfully provides a long-term perspective at the same time as demonstrating his grasp of a wide variety of sources. In his first essay, on the urban economy and trade at the end of the Middle Ages, Bresc sets Palermo in the context of eighth/fourteenth- and ninth/fifteenth-century politics and distinguishes between a "lower" economy "supervised by the municipal authorities" (p. 235) and an "upper" economy based on long-distance commercial

exchanges. The latter was mainly supported by the foreign merchants, and contributed to the transformation of the city into a centre of consumption that imported luxury goods and a commercial centre for exporting, chartering and insuring ships. According to Bresc, the main effects of these dual developments were the decline of artisanal production, the impoverishment of technical knowledge and the reinforcement of feudal aristocracy. In his essay on religious Palermo in the section on “Transversal Approaches” Bresc reconstructs the ecclesiastical landscape and examines the evolution of piety and devotion between the sixth/twelfth and the ninth/fifteenth centuries, processes which “brought Palermo closer to the other Italian cities” (p. 379).

In “Transversal Approaches”, there are five essays, each of which analyses the longer term development of a particular theme from the fifth/eleventh to the ninth/fifteenth century. Laura Sciascia gives a vivid and evocative image of political changes in Sicily from the Norman conquest in 465/1072 to the visit of Charles V of Spain in 942/1535. Palermo was used as a theatre where the rituals of coronation, cavalcades, funerals and royal weddings became stages and mirrors that underlined moments of crucial importance for the history of Sicily. In his exhaustive and well-articulated essay on the Jewish community of Palermo, Giuseppe Mandalà analyses the settlement, juridical and fiscal status, productive and economic activities, cultural life and topography of the city’s Jews. Gian Luca Borghese’s essay about foreigners in Palermo, Sulamith Brodbeck’s study on Monreale and Benoit Grevin’s essay on linguistic cultures and textual production in Palermo complete the “Transversal Approaches” section.

In conclusion, this book is of great interest and its main value lies in having analysed in a novel and scholarly way the economic and urban transformation of Palermo from an imperial province to the capital of a kingdom between the Byzantine and Norman periods. Less attention is given to Aragonese Palermo, best known and well studied in the past by Italian and foreign historians. Indicative bibliography is essentially based on books about Byzantine, Islamic and Norman history. The most original section is “Transversal Approaches” because it allows non-specialists to follow the evolution of some relevant topics across the long term in an effective manner, combining scientific rigour with a clear exposition.

PATRIZIA SARDINA

*University of Palermo, Italy*

*patrizia.sardina@unipa.it*

© 2015 Patrizia Sardina

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09503110.2015.1049428>

### **Islamic Philosophy, Science, Culture, and Religion: Studies in Honor of Dimitri Gutas**

FELICITAS OPWIS and DAVID REISMAN (Eds), 2012

[Islamic Philosophy, Theology, and Science, volume LXXXIII]

Leiden and Boston: Brill

€161.00/\$ 221.00 (hardback)

ISBN 139789004202740

This collected volume of essays written by colleagues, students and friends in honour of Dimitri Gutas, Professor of Arabic and Graeco-Arabic at Yale University,